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THE PROJECT METHOD IN COMPOSITION. I

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SOME EXAMPLES

A junior high school class had been allowed one month to choose their own books for home reading without even advice by the teacher. At the end of the month the teacher said:

I must buy Christmas presents for a boy and a girl of about your age with whose family I stayed awhile during an automobile trip last vacation. Since I do not know them very well I think it safest to send books. I have been thinking that perhaps you can help me. You have been reading books of your own selection this month. You must have chosen what you thought, at least, you would like. Please tell me about your book in such a way as to lead me to buy it for one of my young friends. I do not promise to buy any of the books recommended by the class, but I think you may help me find what I need.

The pupils, glad to be of real service to their very human teacher and stimulated by the prospect of a contest, readily agreed to this proposal. Then followed statements by several of the pupils of the exact aim of the talks they were to give the next day. The remainder of the class hour was given to a discussion of the best means of presenting the books—general evaluation, summary of the plot, character sketch, or a full retelling of one typical incident.

On the following days as each pupil made his report, the teacher listened with a book-buyer's ear. Frequently she asked questions which sprang from this point of view. After each talk the class—the teacher acting as chairman, but joining in the discussion—

considered how well the report was adapted to convince the teacher of the merit of its book as a gift. Most of this criticism had to do with subject-matter, but some of it concerned forms of expression and manner of delivery.

The foregoing may properly be called a project in the sense of a pupil-undertaking. The teacher, it is true, proposed the activity but the pupils felt the proposal as a suggestion rather than a command. They willed to help her or to enter into a contest in book-boasting rather than bowed to her will. As a result they exerted themselves freely and fully, without that internal friction which so frequently makes good work impossible. The concreteness and immediacy of the aim secured effective performance. One observer remarked, "Why, those talks did not seem like *themes* at all."

How to study is always one of the most important problems for pupils, and is especially pressing for students passing from the ordinary high school to a normal college. Most of the books upon the subject are hopelessly dull and ineffective. One normal college instructor meets this need by asking his class at its first or second meeting what the efficient methods of study are. Some, of course, are ready to answer at once, but their replies only scratch the surface of the problem, as the instructor's questions and comments speedily show. Then it is agreed that the next day each student will report upon his (usually *her*) method of attacking some particular study problem—e.g., preparing a report, studying history for recitation, studying without a book, solving a mathematics problem. Before the close of the class period students and instructor make suggestions for effective presentation of the ideas. These usually include orderliness, definiteness, the use of examples, and clear marking of sentences.

Both instructor and students keep notes of the phases of study discussed by the speakers and of the new points made. Since the members of the class are strangers to each other and to the school, criticism is chiefly indirect—questions and informal comment upon subject-matter. Occasionally some especially good exposition is praised and the sources of its power briefly pointed out. The instructor's notes, however, include any characteristic faults of

the speakers which he is able to discover in a single appearance. They are used later.

Here again we find an end or aim seen and approved by the pupils and operating as both motive and guide for their activities. The pupils are in a very real sense self-directive. They are, of course, guided, or even dominated, by the situation. None of us ever escape from our circumstances, but we may be allowed to meet them in our own way or be compelled to accept the dictation of someone in authority. The difference is that between democracy and autocracy.

This exercise, used with students most of whom have had theme work for the preceding twelve years, is so different from just talking or writing for practice—or for a mark!—that the majority of them scarcely recognize it as a composition at all. Many rise to new levels of effectiveness in the use of language. For these the advantage is obvious. Some, who have always regarded “good English” as something for the English classroom only and really of value only in the eyes of the English teacher, relapse in this natural situation into their usual dialect. Bad as this may seem, there is a distinct advantage in coming to grips with the real problem—the improvement of the habitual language of the pupils. In both cases class and instructor escape from the hollow artificiality that deadens so much composition work and makes it of no effect beyond the limits of the class period.

A fifth-grade teacher just before Christmas told her class a little story of her three-year-old niece:

My little niece who lives with me has been talking a great deal about the big doll with eyes that close which she hopes Santa Claus will bring her. So when I was down town the other day I bought one that I thought would satisfy her and ordered it sent out. She is a much petted child and lately has been allowed to amuse herself by opening the packages as they come from the stores. Unfortunately she happened to be standing by when the doll package was delivered and before I could interfere she had opened it and found the doll. Why anyone should be sending such a doll to her maiden aunt she could not imagine. I finally had to tell her that I had bought it for her. . . . I don't suppose any of you have seen mysterious packages about your homes, have you?

Of course they had—dozens of them. Two or three were allowed to volunteer their stories from their seats, and then, when hands

were waving all over the room, those who had stories ready lined up at the front of the room and told their stories in order. There was no discussion of how to make the narratives effective, because the class had repeatedly discovered its own weakness in marking sentences and in ending well. That these points were in the minds of all was evident from the criticism which centered quite closely about them.

Once more the pupils have set up before themselves—projected—a goal and have found their intellectual steps quickened and guided as are the lad's physical steps by the lunch awaiting him at home. Composing has become what we call effortless—more properly strainless, for effort or exertion is really abundant.

The mere fact that the teacher told a story and that the children followed with others somewhat like it does not prove the presence of pupil purposing. Such outward activities have gone on in schoolrooms where pupils were little more than puppets of the teacher's will. The evidence that the children were reacting to the social situation rather than obeying orders was the freedom with which their home life was revealed. They were, except for a little forethought concerning expression, engaged in a conversation about mysterious packages. They were really talking *to their friends*. And the performances, although the time for preparation was less than five minutes, far exceeded the standards set for their grade by any survey.

High-school Seniors were shown a *Saturday Evening Post* cover which represents a florid middle-aged man in golf costume with his bag placing a sign "Gone on important business" on the door of his office. Through the partly closed door can be seen his desk all littered with papers upon which the wall motto "Do it Now" looks down with a wink. On the desk sits a vase of spring flowers. The pupils were asked who the man is, what his business is, whether he often leaves it, who will come to the door and read the sign while he is gone. By this time almost every pupil had a story plot formulated, and all were ready to accept the suggestion that they entertain each other with them. When asked how the matter could be managed best, they said "Let us write. We can say it better." It was so ordered, with the understanding that

each pupil should have the privilege of reading at least three of the papers. This automatically provided an audience for each writer. Probability of action and consistency of character were recommended by the class as necessary to the highest success. Some one remembered that the use of dialogue brightens up a narrative. When the pupils were asked if they all knew how to put dialogue on paper a few confessed their uncertainty. Models were put upon the board by some who thought they knew, and a satisfactory one approved. Then each was left to outline his story in more detail. Finished stories were brought to class next day. First all were asked to proofread their manuscripts for dialogue form and again for comma punctuation. Then the papers were passed one place to the left for reading and pencil comment. At intervals of five minutes this operation was repeated twice. The comments, of course, concerned the subject-matter chiefly, but there were many suggested grammatical and rhetorical changes scattered over the papers. Finally the stories were collected and three chosen for reading aloud the next day. These were discussed to discover wherein they were better than the others. In addition to plot and character, naturalness of dialogue and vigor of diction seemed their most notable qualities.

Other composition undertakings have been described more or less completely in the *English Journal*—e.g., “Friends by Mail” (November, 1920); “An Experiment in Problem Teaching” (October, 1917); “An English Project Motivated by History” (December, 1920); “A Big Business English Project” (October, 1920); etc.

THE ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLE

All of the activities described have this common difference from the traditional classroom program: the pupils wrote and talked, not because the teacher expected it of them or because they needed practice, but because there was an audience expecting something of them. They were responsible not to an autocratic power, benevolent though it might be, but to the social group of which they were part. The driving force lay, not in some remote and contingent need realized by the pupils only at second hand through the teacher, but in a present need realized directly by the pupils.

For most of the pupils concerned there was no compulsion—merely that impulsion of social expectation which we all must face and obey or defy every day. In the perfect working of this social method every learner acts upon his own volition in a not unnatural situation.

From a slightly different point of view, we may say that in every case the pupils talked or wrote because something was to be accomplished by it. Sometimes the mere communication of their own feelings and fancies or the entertainment of their classmates and friends was the chief end they had in view; sometimes the communication of ideas was merely the means of bringing about some practical end. (See "Civic-Art Project as Motivation in Composition" in the "Round Table," *English Journal*, May, 1922.)

We cannot stop just here to show how this bringing pupils to face situations rather than the taskmaster behind the desk is a necessary result of modern notions of education; but we shall be helped in our search for the program or procedure of the method by noting that it is a part of the movement to educate for life through real living, living as natural and full as may be. This use of language to communicate ideas, fancies, and feelings is just the extra-school, the "life" use of it. An analysis of the activities of persons engaged in practical undertakings involving the use of language should therefore reveal the essential or at least the usual steps to be taken in the classroom.

WRITING AND SPEAKING IN DAILY LIFE

When once the material has been gathered for a book, the editorial work completed, the type set, and plates made, additional copies can be manufactured very cheaply. Hence every publisher is eager to extend the sale of his books. So Henry Willett, of Houghton, Brace, and Heath, at his desk in Newton decides to write a circular informing teachers of English of the merits of German's *Language Gymnastics*. He weighs the possible arguments he may present, trying to determine their probable effectiveness with the persons he is to address. How long a circular will be read? How can he make his statement interesting enough to prevent its immediate consignment to the wastebasket? Dare he use a breezy

style, or will it pay to be very conservative in expression? His outline made, he fills it out. When his stenographer has it all neatly typewritten he reads it over critically, not merely to correct errors but to make any possible improvements. He tries to read as if he himself were a possible user of the text. As a cook frequently bakes a try-cake before putting all her mixture into the pan, so he prints and mails 100 or 500 circulars and waits a few days for returns. If the number of inquiries is satisfactory he gives orders for printing and mailing 25,000 copies. But this is not the end. The office is deluged with inquiries about *Language Gymnastics* and requests for sample copies. Willett is elated at the success of his circular, and reads it over again, perhaps many times, in a glow of satisfaction and with the intent of discovering the ideas or the phrasing which proved so effective. He may even burrow into the correspondence files to examine the inquiries for light upon this question. Finally, in the next similar circular he writes he will try to use the same method of appeal.

(1) Willett faced a situation, the most prominent features of which were his possession of a book for sale and teachers' ignorance of the book's existence or at least of its great merits. (2) Almost inevitably he decided that the teachers must be informed. (3) Then he considered means of accomplishing his purpose. We commonly say he "laid his plans." Before he began to act, he made up his mind that he would use a circular: that it should be about four pages, each 6×9 inches: and that it should be printed in colors with diagrams. Then he made an outline of the points he wished to present. (4) He began to carry out his plans. As he proceeded with this execution he several times recurred to the planning and made minor changes. He even jumped ahead to the judgment of results by sending out a trial batch of circulars. (5) The action done, he must take the consequences. Since he was vitally interested in the outcome, he could not fail to note the degree of success he achieved. Naturally with this emotionalized observation of the results went some inquiry into the causes, probably a complete review of the circular and of the process of composing it. (6) Since it is a fundamental tendency of human nature to repeat pleasure-giving acts and to refrain from painful ones, he is reasonably

sure to use again those elements of his procedure which he judges contributed most to his success. If he had been a stupid person he would have been unable to analyze his circular into its elements or he would probably have misjudged the importance of those elements. This correct analysis and the attachment of the satisfaction of success to the proper elements is essential to his progress as a bookseller.

Houghton, Brace, and Heath have also salesmen on the road. In spite of the many inquiries about *Language Gymnastics* these road men are not securing adoptions. Willett, as sales manager, arranges to have most of these men come in for a Saturday afternoon conference. They tell of the presentations they have made and of the responses they have received. They give especial consideration to the methods used by one man who has secured two adoptions. Finally they outline a presentation which they think will be effective and decide upon good answers to make to certain objections frequently encountered. The general features of this activity are just the same as those of the manager's except that the planning—step 3—is largely co-operative, as it usually proves to be in school-room undertakings.

A *Saturday Evening Post* story by Harry Leon Wilson can be shown to have a very similar history. The author's manner of collecting material was somewhat different—rather the unhampered play of association than the logical assembling and rejection of ideas—but the story, too, had its origin in a social situation, was deliberately purposed, was somewhat carefully planned, was written out, was probably revised, was judged by its author in the light of its effect upon others, and through its success confirmed his habits of style. In general, it may be shown that all premeditated speaking or writing has its origin in a social situation, that the author's or speaker's aim is rather definitely formulated, that there is planning of what to say and how to say it in order to gain the end most certainly and completely, and that the actual expression is followed by much or little—always some—consideration of the value of the whole undertaking and of the effectiveness of the means used to attain the end. Very frequently the planning includes a rehearsal, either audible or mental, if the expression is to be oral;

or a revision if the expression is written. Both of these combine the planning with criticism or judgment; indeed evaluation goes on all the time from the first consideration of the desirability of the undertaking up to the moment when the whole matter is pushed into oblivion by subsequent interests. Where the project is a group affair—the report of a committee, for example—there is consultation as to the best means of carrying it through, and usually after its completion discussion of the degree and causes of success. Very similar consultations occur where all are engaged in similar individual projects—for example, the annual Better Business Letters Conference attended by a large number of directors of correspondence from all parts of the United States. Even such unconsidered talk as ordinary conversation obviously has most of these steps, and we should not be straining the point far to say that it has them all implicitly and informally. In conversation, however, responses to social situations are immediate and the amount of planning is so small as to be negligible.

Such, then, is the pattern of the language activities of daily life. Such will be found also the pattern of the typical undertakings described in the beginning of this exposition. The pupils face a situation, form a purpose, lay plans for executing that purpose, carry out their plans with tongue or pen, and finally judge their own performance. Thus the pupils are the chief actors: they will, they choose, they judge, at every step in the process. These are the typical features of project procedure.

SOURCES OF PROJECTS

If the undertakings in school are to be natural, as much as possible like those of practical life, we may reasonably seek among everyday activities for the types to be used in the classroom. This is to say at once that project possibilities are infinitely various. Since, however, this sweeping statement may by its very inclusiveness baffle us in our attempts to find specific occasions for writing and talking by our pupils, we shall examine the field a section at a time.

There seem to be three chief types of purposes in the use of language: (1) to entertain someone, (2) to inform someone, and

(3) to persuade someone. Perhaps a fourth—to relieve one's own feelings—should be added, though it is rarely a conscious purpose, and does not often work alone in premeditated expression. We are frequently so filled with delight, sorrow, or anger that we "just must tell someone," but we lose our desire for such expression whenever we perceive our audience out of sympathy with us; what we really wish is not expression but sympathy. Sometimes the wish to entertain combines with this impulse. "Showing off"—securing admiration—is frequently a motive, though rarely a purpose, in the use of language. We do not desire to strengthen this spirit, and shall ignore it entirely.

Entertainment is usually provided through some form of storytelling. The subject-matter may be reminiscent or imaginative; the form, verse, drama, or prose narrative. Sometimes the story is funny, sometimes pathetic, sometimes thrilling, sometimes unusual or even marvelous. All these possibilities are open to the teacher looking for classroom language projects, but the verse form is little used and straight narrative greatly predominates over dramatic representation. Two of the four examples with which this chapter started are of this narrative-for-entertainment sort, one of them reminiscence or "narrative from personal experience," and the other imaginative, starting from a picture. Subjects of this sort are very commonly assigned for themes by teachers who try to "motivate" their work, and at first seem the easiest of all to handle. Care should be taken that they do not usurp more than their due portion of the English time. They by no means constitute the majority of the writing or talking of the ordinary adult.

Entertainment may occasionally be furnished by description or the expression of personal feeling. However, except in the essay—a peculiarly mature form of literature, which most persons never learn to read and have no occasion to write—description and personal feeling are usually incidental to other matters such as stories and explanation or argument. As independent units they do not seem suitable for frequent classroom use.

Information is usually given by courteous persons, except in persuasion, only as it is desired by the recipient. Someone's curiosity or practical need furnishes the occasion. In the ultra-

modern school, where undertakings are the rule in every class, there are numerous occasions of practical need for information which can be supplied by student report—after previous investigation, if need be. In more conservative institutions, curiosity must be the chief occasion for the presentation of information, but the teacher who is himself interested in this marvelous world and all its complexities will have little difficulty in turning his pupils into animated question marks, ever asking for more explanations than can be supplied. A little team work with other instructors whereby supplementary reports for which their time is insufficient may be transferred to the English period will easily fill any possible deficiency.

In securing occasions for persuasion the teacher in the “doing” school is again at an advantage. His English class may frequently become the deliberative body of the group, debating various matters of class and school policy. Such discussions prove very different from, and much more vital than, the old formal debates—or even the newer “discussion contests”—because there are practical decisions to be influenced by the speeches. They call out less of the I-am-right-and-I-can-prove-it attitude and more of the really persuasive spirit. Differences of opinion, coming to attention especially in the history class, and playground disputes are used successfully.

The part played by the teacher in this pupil-active class; how grammar, rhetoric, and mechanics are taught by this plan; the considerations in favor of the project method, and the pitfalls that menace the unwary will be dealt with later.